



## The Persistence of National Victimhood: Bosniak Post-War Memory Politics of the Srebrenica Mass Killings

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### Abstract

This article reveals the origins of the radicalisation of memory politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina after the year 2010. It shows that the radicalisation in the public sphere of Bosnia and Herzegovina was eventually possible due to the long-term persistence of the nationalist commemorative strategy, rooted in the dialectic mechanism of consolidating and antagonising relevant reference groups, and responsible for structuring the national memories of the last war according to an exclusivist martyrological model. Based on the example of Bosniak post-war memory politics regarding the Srebrenica mass killings, the study describes a more universal political mechanism, one characteristic also of the post-war Bosnian Serb and Bosnian Croat nationalist factions.

**Keywords:** memory politics; Srebrenica; national victimhood; Bosnia and Herzegovina

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## Introduction

This article considers the issue of contemporary radicalisation of memory politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Using the example of post-war Bosniak memory politics in relation to the 1995 Srebrenica mass killings, I argue that this radicalisation could have occurred mostly due to the uninterrupted persistence of nationalist commemorative strategies in the public discourse of Bosnia and Herzegovina throughout the entire post-war period. More precisely, I show how, between 1995 and 2011, the representatives of the Bosniak political faction used the nationalist strategy based on the dialectic of consolidating their own national population and antagonising other communities, including the International Community in Bosnia (IC), the Bosnian Serb, and the Serbian factions, to produce, develop, and maintain in the public sphere an interpretation of the Srebrenica killings according to which this event was not much more than a cornerstone of exclusively Bosniak national identity based on religious victimhood. I also reflect on why the continuous efforts of the IC have proved ineffective when it comes to marginalisation and elimination of such strategies and the radical memory discourses they produced.

In the article, I use an approach that combines a political sociology perspective, aimed at revealing the mechanisms underpinning political actions (e.g. Ashplant et al., 2000; Bernhard & Kubik, 2014; Malešević, 2006), with a cultural analysis, aimed at tracking down the symbolic changes that result from these actions (e.g. Olick, 1998, 1999). It is a moderately instrumentalist approach that recognises the mutual interminglement of both aspects of the process described by Bourdieu (1989, p. 22) as the “production and imposition of the legitimate vision of the social world”, yet prioritises its political aspect (strategies) over the symbolic one (representations).

Moreover, I use a top-down approach that considers memory politics as the domain of, primarily, professional political actors who occupy dominant positions in a given political field, and thus set the framework for the rest of its participants. In the case of memory politics in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina, for each of the three nationalist factions that dominate their respective parts of the political field (i.e. the Bosniak, the Bosnian Serb, and the Bosnian Croat one), three groups of political actors are crucial: (a) professional politicians affiliated with the party that is in power in a given national segment of the political scene; (b) the politically involved leadership of the nation’s major religious institution; (c) war veterans associated with one of the armies that participated in the last war. Therefore, the term “the Bosniak nationalist faction”, which I use in this article, includes: (a) politicians from three political parties: the Party of Democratic Action (SDA, dominant in 1995–2000, 2002–2006, and after 2010), the Party for Bosnia and Herzegovina (SBiH, dominant in 2006–2010), the Union for a Better Future (SBB, important after 2009); (b) the leadership of the Islamic Community (IZ), gathered around Reis-ul-Ulema

Mustafa Cerić; (c) high army officers with a combat background in the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina (ARBiH).

In other words, this article is about how nationalist elites in Bosnia instrumentalised the war past for political purposes throughout the first fifteen years after the end of the war. Based on the Bosniak case, I describe a more universal political mechanism that is also characteristic of the contemporary Bosnian Serb and the Bosnian Croat nationalist factions. Since 1995, these three factions have been mirror images of one another, and although they differed in symbolic contents they used, they nevertheless shared identical ways of using this content at the very same political moments. I selected the Bosniak case, since it remains under-researched in comparison to the other two. Consequently, this article is not about how the war past was interpreted by the non-nationalist political forces, or civil society organisations, or the local residents themselves. All the more, it is also not about how the war past in Bosnia should be cultivated or interpreted. Finally, this article is not an attempt to go beyond the dominant consensus in international scholarship that Srebrenica was a genocide, as established by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) sentence on Radislav Krstić in 2001.

Nevertheless, being aware that the legal concept of “the Srebrenica genocide” is both consistently politically denied and overused by the main nationalist factions in Bosnia, in this article I use the term “Srebrenica mass killings” in order to emphasise the un-involvement of my analysis in any of these attempts. This approach is close to the findings of David (2020a, 2020b), who encourages us to distinguish between, on the one hand, normative Western models of interpreting the past produced by a quasi-universal human rights memorialisation agenda to foster reconciliation processes, and, on the other hand, how they are used by local political forces for their own purposes in countries where this agenda is externally imposed. It is crucial to recognise that, in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, this difference converges particularly in the concept of “the Srebrenica genocide”, because only with this recognition can we avoid biased analysis based on moral premises and fully expose the political dimension of commemorative actions.

The article builds on several significant publications on general memory trends in post-war Bosnia (e.g. Hajdarpašić, 2010; Moll, 2013; Palmberger, 2006; Rekšć, 2011; Sokol, 2014) as well as on memory politics in relation to Srebrenica (Bougarel, 2007, 2012; Duijzings, 2007; Pollack, 2010), but it takes a slightly different direction. Namely, instead of entering a separate strand of law-oriented research regarding ICTY (see Kostić, 2012; Nettefeld & Wagner, 2013; Subotić, 2010), or focusing on static products of state policy, such as school textbooks (Bartulović, 2008; Torsti, 2007), or offering a deeper yet fragmented view of political processes (e.g. Czerwiński, 2005; Kostadinova, 2014; von Puttkamer, 2016), I propose a systematic analysis of public discourse that shows the full dynamics of Bosniak memory politics in the Bosnian public space between 1995 and 2011.

Methodologically, the article is based on a problem-oriented sociological discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2005; Wodak et al., 2009) of the commemorative message delivered

on subsequent anniversaries of the Srebrenica mass killings (11 July) by three main media outlets, largely controlled by the Bosniak nationalist faction, that address their message to the Bosniak population: *Dnevni Avaz*, *Ljiljan*, and *Preporod*.<sup>1</sup> In the course of my argument, I refer to three dimensions of this message: the central speeches delivered by Bosniak officials during the annual commemorations on 11 July; the central symbolic practices carried out as part of commemorative programmes of the annual commemorations; the accompanying message related to the anniversary, but published a few days before or after 11 July.

## Clarifying National Victimhood

Srebrenica mass killings were made the cornerstone of Bosniak memory politics until the end of the 1990s, during a period of extreme political polarisation of three nationalist factions in Bosnia and their lack of confidence in the peace-keeping mission of the IC. It was professional politicians, gathered around the SDA, led by Alija Izetbegović, who eventually gained primacy in the symbolic framing of this event on behalf of the whole Bosniak faction. Initially, however, the IZ's leadership (Mustafa Cerić, Husein Kavazović) and the ARBiH officers (e.g. Ramiz Bećirović, Rasim Delić) were stronger in putting forward their interpretative patterns that I term the "heroic" and the "hellish". Although both of them appeared in media messages during the first year after the event, the former mostly in the *Ljiljan* and the latter in the *Dnevni Avaz*, they differed from each other to a great extent. While the heroic pattern exposed a variant of national martyrdom that preferred the heroism of the "Bosniaks of Srebrenica" over the victimhood of the murdered people, the hellish one was strongly rooted in religious victimhood, namely in the Koranic images of hell and apocalypse.

The interpretative axis of the heroic pattern was the long march of refugees displaced by the Bosnian Serb forces from the enclave and led by the soldiers of the 28th ARBiH Division towards Tuzla, i.e. the territory controlled by the Bosniak forces (H. Hadžić, 1995; Hajdarević, 1995; Husejnović, 1995). According to this pattern, members of the Bosniak nation survived this murderous march not only by retaining internal solidarity, but above all owing to the activities of its heroised guards: soldiers and imams who defended them from the Bosnian Serb Army (VRS). The heroisation of the soldier was based, firstly, on building his monolithic image as a steadfast humanist warrior who always made the right strategic decisions and combined attempts to inflict severe losses on the enemy with the desire to protect his own nation. Secondly, it rested upon describing the soldier as a refuge of stability who never showed fear or succumbed to panic, always walked the front line, taking the enemy's fire upon himself, and expressed his utmost devotion to the nation by dying

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1 All quotations from the analysed outlets referred to in the article have been translated from the Bosnian language into English by the author.

a heroic death in the conviction that “Bosniaks must never, until the judgment day, put their rifles aside” (Spahić, 1995). In turn, the heroisation of the imam consisted of slightly different moves. The first one was to deprive the imam of his unique, superhuman attributes by inscribing him into the community of national suffering experienced by ordinary civilians: hunger, lack of sleep, fear, mental exhaustion. The second move was to make the imam a spiritual leader of the Bosniak nation, i.e. a person capable of interpreting this extreme experience as a divine test for the nation’s moral maturity.

Although the hellish pattern also exposed the refugee march, it interpreted it differently, i.e. as an apocalyptic journey through the abyss of suffering (e.g. Kozar, 1996; Numanović, 1996b), during which the Bosniaks were forced by the VRS to break through a burning forest, fell into traps, went mad after entering an area shrouded in hallucinogenic gases, etc. This scheme eschewed heroism and solidarity, preferring to focus on exploring the symbolism of victimhood and the metaphors of a broken nation. In this regard, two most important topics were: the topic of simultaneous physical and spiritual suffering, characteristic of the Koranic vision of hell, and the symbol of a lost, lonely refugee. The first one was particularly evident in the descriptions of collective hallucinations triggered by poison sprayed by the VRS soldiers, which not only drove individual Bosniaks mad and led them to self-harming or committing suicide, but also divided the whole national community by sparking internal conflicts and mutual acts of violence, including murders on co-nationals. It was clear also in the descriptions of the inability to satisfy hunger and thirst by the refugees, even if food or water were within the reach of their hands. As for the lost refugee motif, as he accidentally moved away from his co-nationals, he found himself in hell. Wandering around in search of his way back, he walked on a carpet of decaying human corpses, drowned in a sea of Bosniak blood, and kept encountering “fragmented corpses, parts of bodies and heads [...] moaning and blood and dead bodies everywhere” (Numanović, 1996a).

Despite these differences, both patterns interpreted the culmination point of the march in terms of the symbolic unification of the refugee column with the Bosniak ARBiH officers. In the first case, the column owed the unification to the heroised soldiers who broke through the VRS envelopment towards the “legendary commander Naser Orić” (H. Hadžić, 1995), sent by the government to help refugees. In the second case, the column was to break the enemy envelopment under the cover of rainfall and wind brought in by God-Allah, and unite with Orić owing to a mystical, supernatural bond that kept the nation together despite its geographical disunity.

Although the SDA leadership took over the symbolic initiative during the third anniversary of the event, their commemorative direction had already been set by Alija Izetbegović in his speeches at the first two anniversary celebrations in Tuzla (1996 and 1997), where he gave a definite priority to the victimhood optics over the heroic one, and developed a two-track interpretation of the Srebrenica mass killings. On the one hand, Izetbegović monumentalised Srebrenica in national terms as “a symbol and name for the countless places of massacre

in Bosnia" (A. Izetbegović, 1996) and "the deepest of all Bosnian wounds" (A. Izetbegović, 1997), while on the other hand he articulated it in universalist terms, i.e. as "a tragedy that affects every human being and every woman in the world" (A. Izetbegović, 1997). While the first, consolidatory message was addressed to the members of the Bosniak nation, the second one was addressed to the IC and international public opinion in order to legitimise the memory of the mass killings globally. The latter line of argumentation was most fully articulated by Mustafa Spahić in his 1997 anniversary appeal for an intensive "cultural universalisation of Srebrenica" (Spahić, 1997), addressed to Bosniak intellectuals, whom he urged to thematise the mass killings in art works, arguing that only the international recognition of such art as universal "protects the nation from the revision of history".

After reducing the symbolic significance of both ARBiH officers in the official message, by having placed victimhood as the primary optics through which the event should be interpreted, the SDA leadership attempted at marginalising the role of the IZ leadership by desacralising this victimhood, i.e. minimising its religious dimension. The latter re-articulation was made possible by means of introducing a new, quasi-independent political actor onto the commemorative stage, namely the Mothers of Srebrenica,<sup>2</sup> which allowed the SDA to put the victim-mother symbol at the very heart of the official memory of the event. Alija Izetbegović played the main role in involving the Mothers of Srebrenica in memory politics, as he symbolically gave up the floor to them in 1997 as part of his central speech (Huremović, 1997), and later, on behalf of the whole nation, he sent them an open letter, expressing collective support for their suffering (A. Izetbegović, 1997).

The victim-mother symbol turned out to be a particularly meaningful motif for several reasons. Firstly, it referred directly to the problem of the physical destruction of families during the Srebrenica killings. Here, the mother was presented as the main victim of the displacements, i.e. the symbolic foundation of the family who, after her natural life space had been destroyed and her family ties cut, was condemned to a lifelong suffering. A series of articles from 1997 depict the mother as an old lady in despair: "Today she looks like an old lady. Grey hair, sunken eyes" (Šogolj, 1997); "she has aged a great deal since the fall of Srebrenica and is getting weaker every day" (M. Smajlović, 1997). Without family as a natural point of reference, the mother was presented as defining herself only through its absence: "I am Alyich Zahida – I do not have four sons [...] Šuhra Maljić of Potočari – I do not have eleven of them" (A. Hadžić, 1997). Secondly, the newspapers depicted the enormity of the damage inflicted on the Bosniak nation by the enemy and pointed to the disintegration of internal collective solidarity by using the symbolism

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2 Full name: Mothers of the Enclaves of Srebrenica and Žepa – the association of the enclaves' female refugees who lost their husbands, sons, and brothers in the mass executions in Srebrenica, and some of whom took part in the march into the free territories. The association was founded in 1995 with the active participation of SDA politicians, such as Ibran Mustafić, who was a member of the association's board. Since then, the association has developed a wide range of social and political activities, including the roles of mnemonic actors, discussed in this article. The chairwoman is Munira Subašić. Other recognisable representatives include Džemila Delalić, Fata Mehmedović, Hajra Čatić, and Kada Hotić.

of powerless mothers wandering around different refugee centres – mothers being at the mercy of strangers – or by emphasising the extreme poverty of mothers-refugees, who “barely survive on disability benefits and humanitarian aid” (M. Smajlović, 1997). Thirdly, the victim-mother motif made it possible to combine the symbolism of the survivor-refugee with that of the dead victim, since finding the latter was the central aspiration of the Association’s representatives, which they articulated during subsequent central anniversary events (e.g. Delić, 1999; A. Hadžić, 1997, 1998).

The Mothers of Srebrenica were established a key symbol of national victimhood and a significant political actor during the 1999 central anniversary celebrations. Firstly, they received support from the IZ leadership, who accompanied them in taking the first post-war trip to Potočari, i.e. the place where the mass killings began. Secondly, this trip dominated the anniversary media messages as the first post-war symbolic attempt at realising the postulate of the Bosniak return to Srebrenica, which the nationalists had consistently articulated since the war’s end. Thirdly, the Mothers acted for the first time as the representative of the whole Bosniak faction in the relationship with the IC by sending the latter a letter with threefold demands regarding Srebrenica: humanitarian (the IC should find missing persons), legal (they should adequately punish those guilty of crimes), and symbolic (they should erect a plaque in Potočari in order to commemorate their own co-responsibility for the mass killings; Delić, 1999).

Interestingly, the latter move facilitated a partial breakthrough in the all-faction consensus regarding the antagonising message, i.e. the way the image of a national enemy was built. While initially there prevailed the image of a total enemy represented by the Bosnian Serb forces supported by the alleged anti-Bosniak collusion of Banja Luka, Belgrade, and the International Community – all of which were said to aim at the extermination of the whole Bosniak nation – after the year 1999 the situation changed. More precisely, with the Mothers’ demand that the IC take corrective action in respect of the tragedy, media coverage started assigning a more ambivalent role to the IC as co-responsible for the tragedy, yet not parleying with Banja Luka or Belgrade, who remained the main perpetrators and the arch-enemies. In short, the SDA leadership managed to take advantage over their two main rivals within the Bosniak faction owing to making two re-articulations of the Srebrenica mass killings: firstly, by taking the victimhood optics to the fore and, secondly, by desacralising this victimhood and making the mother symbol its main representation.

## Between De-Nationalisation and Re-Articulation

After a moderate turn in Bosnia and Herzegovina in autumn 2000, due to the loss of political power by three nationalist factions in favour of the social democrats, the Bosniak faction developed a two-track commemorative strategy. On the one hand, they strengthened the universalist perspective, one based on the “cooperationist” framework, in order

to meet the growing IC's expectations, according to which all nationalist camps should seek cooperation with one another. They had put this perspective forward in central anniversary speeches since the first commemoration officially held in Potočari (2000), thus attempting to secure themselves the continued favour of the IC. On the other hand, they kept developing the nationalist perspective, one based on a consolidatory-antagonising framework, in the message regarding the central symbolic practices in Potočari and in the accompanying message.

As for the universalist perspective, from the ways the Bosniak faction modified the central speeches it seems clear that its purpose was to make Srebrenica a place of the symbolic reconciliation of all three parties to the conflict. Firstly, in line with the IC's postulate that "the ceremony should be exclusively religious in character" (Mandal, 2001), they reduced the importance of politicians' speeches in favour of the IZ leadership. Secondly, they abandoned the consolidating rhetoric based on national victimhood in favour of a more inclusive perspective that stressed the local and universal collective identifications. Thirdly, they eliminated the antagonising language of political revenge in favour of a legal language centred around categories such as "justice", "trial", "judgment" and "reconciliation". This way, Srebrenica started to be framed as a departure point from which a better future for the whole Bosnia and Herzegovina was to be built: a "passport from the past to the future" (Cerić, 2001), guaranteed by the ICTY that by then had already put first perpetrators on trial.

The consolidatory rhetoric was removed from the central speeches in two steps. Firstly, Mustafa Cerić (IZ) and Suleiman Tihić (SDA, the new leader) gave up inscribing the Srebrenica killings into the Bosniak national narrative, and reframed them as part of the European and global history, e.g. by naming them a "black card of the European history" (Cerić, 2002) or "a great shame for all mankind" (Cerić, 2003a), or by comparing them to the 9/11 terrorist attacks (A. Hadžić, 2002), to emphasise devotion to the cooperationist strategy of crossing national particularities. This went hand in hand with Cerić's definite shift from the radical pan-Islamic course he had presented since the early 1990s towards a moderate perspective of the European Islam, according to which "the [Bosnian] Muslim soul has a European character" (Cerić, 2003b). Secondly, both leaders replaced the nation-centred framing of the Srebrenica victims with describing them in terms of universal or local identification. While Cerić preferred replacing the word "Bosniaks" with "people" and depicted the victims e.g. as "innocent people from Potočari" (Cerić, 2004) or "male people killed in Srebrenica" (Cerić, 2003b), Tihić more willingly used the local identification, i.e. "Srebreničani" (the Srebrenica inhabitants; see e.g. Tihić, 2003). In this way, the Bosniak faction tried to de-nationalise the victims and make the victim symbol inclusive enough to enable every inhabitant of Bosnia, regardless of nationality or religion, to identify with it.

The antagonising rhetoric was weakened in the central speeches by the narrowing and the individualisation of the category of enemy. For example, the dominant collective label "Chetniks", used in the 1990s to describe all Serbs, was replaced in 2001 either with



pointing at a narrow group of the VRS soldiers as the executors of orders given by those few main perpetrators (Hadžić, 2001), or with a general label of “evil killers” (Clinton, 2003) that stigmatised no specific individual. Nevertheless, the Bosniak leaders still emphasised the conditionality of such a shift as dependent on two factors: first, on the acceptance of the universalist perspective by the entire Serbian nation and, second, on the final conviction of the main perpetrators, who at the time remained mostly at large.

At the same time, however, the Bosniak media kept the nationalist perspective in their message regarding central symbolic practices as well as the accompanying message. More precisely, they fostered the consolidatory rhetoric by re-articulating national victimhood in religious terms again and inscribing it into a wider metaphor of the Bosniak nation coming back home, both culminating in the annual collective funeral of the killed victims that became part of the central event from 2004, with the mother symbol as the bonding element between these two. The central event on 11 July was annually framed as a moment of national consolidation of Bosniaks from all around the world in their cradle in Potočari, starting with the speculations led by the *Dnevni Avaz* on both the number of towns and cities from Bosnia and Herzegovina, and other countries whose inhabitants had declared their willingness to participate in the event, as well as the increasing number of buses prepared by the authorities to transport people to the place. Next, the appearance of the national buses in Potočari was described as a moment of the grassroots renewal of national solidarity. By recalling such moments as the spontaneous prayers in a “unique, five-thousand *jamaat*<sup>3</sup> [formed by] the bus passengers” (S. Smajlović, 2001; see also e.g. “Nit’ se ne može umrijeti, niti živjeti”, 2004), the Bosniak nation was presented as a community bound by strong collective emotions; a community that reproduced itself somehow instinctively and uncontrollably, thus escaping institutional limitations and routines.

The religious symbolisation of national victimhood intensified particularly after the opening of the Srebrenica-Potočari Memorial Centre and Cemetery<sup>4</sup> in September 2003, when the annual ceremonial funeral of the exhumed remains of selected victims was introduced. The media covered the funeral as the most significant commemorative practice of a consolidatory character by means of presenting it as a moment of two-stage national reunification of the living and dead Bosniaks, thus creating a vision of the nation as an eternal, timeless being. While the living arrived at the spot in hundreds of coaches, the remains of the dead arrived in hundreds of coffins in a truck column that always followed the same route: from Visoko (where they were prepared for the funeral), through the Sarajevo district of Vogošća (where post-war Srebrenica refugees settled en masse)

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3 *Jamaat* – a gathering of a group of followers of Islam for some specific purpose (e.g. interpreting religion or mourning the dead together); a form of collective mutual aid.

4 The Centre was financed by the IC. The construction lasted two years, i.e. in July 2001 the foundation stone was laid and in September 2003 it was ceremonially opened in the presence of Bill Clinton, who had been President of the United States at the time of the mass killings. At the moment, the official name of the Centre is: The Srebrenica-Potočari Memorial and Cemetery for the Victims of the 1995 Genocide.

and by the building of the BiH Presidency (where the central executive of the country is located), up to Potočari.

The first stage of the reunification included the collective greeting of the trucks in Potočari, on the eve of the central event, by the Mothers of Srebrenica and the families of the victims, and the unloading of the coffins into the outstretched hands of the waiting crowd, who carried them to the battery factory, the main crime scene in July 1995, now serving as the staging area for the burial. The aesthetics of the coffins was to symbolise only the collective dimension of the victimhood, i.e. they all had the same shape and size; they were entirely covered with a green canvas referring to Islam as a religious criterion of national identification; they differed from each other only by ordinal number.<sup>5</sup> The second stage was a funeral ceremony, held during the central event on 11 July, which included the collective transfer of coffins to the cemetery in front of the crowd of thousands of participants; a series of ritualised mourning actions, such as the lamentation of the Mothers of Srebrenica over the fresh graves; and a collective farewell prayer led by Mustafa Cerić, which culminated in a peculiar dialogue between the living and the dead, improvised by the IZ leader: "Will we forgive the dead? We forgave. But the question is: will the dead forgive us?" (Sinanović, 2004). Apart from exhibiting the attributes of the eternity and timelessness of the Bosniak nation, the coverage of this dialogue emphasised the multi-generational collective obligation to cultivate the memory of murdered co-nationals. The whole funeral was presented as an act of intertwining individual histories of Bosniak families into one identical national fate, condensed in the religious victimhood.

The antagonising rhetoric was kept in the message regarding the central symbolic practices and oriented towards the Bosnian Serbs, particularly by presenting the bus journeys to Potočari as a renewal of confrontation with the perpetrators (e.g. Borović, 2000; Mandal, 2001). The message indicated that the first impressions of desperate mothers and old people, frightened children, and sad men after leaving the buses was that the "Bosniak house" was still inhabited by strangers. The media reported that the travellers saw faces of the perpetrators in house windows or among the police units protecting the streets of Srebrenica. They also kept depicting the Serbs as bloodthirsty aggressors throwing stones at Bosniak buses (Hadžić, 2001) or provocateurs waving nationalist flags from balconies (Hadžić, 2001). Finally, they fostered the antagonising rhetoric by using the life and death dichotomy, i.e. by contrasting the post-war Serb-inhabited Srebrenica, depicted as a dead city that had lost basic features of social life, i.e. religion (demolished mosques), civilisation (devastated buildings and dark, dirty streets), and connection with the world (abandoned bus station and empty shop shelves), with the momentary rebirth of life, light, and hope, brought by the returning Bosniaks (e.g. S. Smajlović, 2001, 2002).

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5 They were all mass funerals, because several hundred victims were buried in each grave. For example, 282 coffins were buried in July 2003, 338 in 2004, 505 in 2006, 308 in 2008, and so on. The number of buried victims increased in the case of round anniversaries, e.g. 610 victims were buried in 2005, and 775 in 2010.

Returning back to framing national victimhood in religious terms, the accompanying message was additionally strengthened by the symbolisation of the bones of the murdered victims, and the *nišan*, i.e. a white Islamic tombstone. While the bone symbolism was first used in 2000 by Aziz Kadribegović, the editor-in-chief of the *Preporod*, to criticise the rapprochement of the Bosniak faction with the IC, the motif of *nišan* was introduced two years later in the discussion on the symbolic meaning of the Memorial Centre. On the one hand, Kadribegović used the bones as a metaphor of a broken Bosniak nation, claiming that the aforementioned rapprochement was taking place on its ruins, and argued that the bones were “the remains of the Srebrenica martyrs” (Kadribegović, 2000), i.e. the holy national relics. His accusation against the IC of insulting the whole Bosniak nation was based on the claim that IC did nothing to find and bury all the bones of his murdered co-nationals, “scattered across various containers, warehouses and dark tunnels” (Kadribegović, 2002), which he considered fundamental to restore national dignity to the Bosniaks.

On the other hand, the *nišan* symbolism was used as a counterbalance to the IC’s vision of the Memorial Centre as a meeting place of the local and the universal, devoid of any national symbolism (Čukle, 2003). The architects of the Centre tried to render the inclusive symbolism of Srebrenica through an appropriate spatial arrangement. Not only did they create its roof on the plan of the oxeye daisy that abundantly grows in the Srebrenica area to emphasise the local identification of the murdered, but they also oriented the central prayer space towards Mecca to stress the universal character of Islam. Moreover, they placed the ossuary that was supposed to symbolise the common roots of Christianity and Islam next to it. Finally, the fountain with mountain water at the ossuary was to symbolise the eternal interweaving of these two dimensions. The supporters of the *nišan* symbolism countered this by pointing out that the tombstone should be the most visible element of the Centre and the key symbol representing Srebrenica’s collective victimhood. They argued not only that the ubiquity of *nišan* should go hand in hand with its uniform appearance (Kadribegović, 2002), but also that every *nišan* should contain a Koranic inscription confirming that the victim has the status of *šehid*,<sup>6</sup> i.e. a martyr for the Islamic faith. It was an obvious reference to the Bosniak wartime memory politics, when *šehid* was turned into a synonym of a national hero (Bougarel, 2007, pp. 167–192). As they eventually achieved both these goals, in subsequent years the Centre filled up with thousands of *nišans* and the Bosniak media began calling it the *šehid cemetery*.<sup>7</sup>

6 It is verse 154 from Al-Baqarah (2:154), which reads: “And do not say about those who are killed in the way of Allah, ‘They are dead.’ Rather, they are alive, but you perceive [it] not.”

7 For a detailed analysis of the 1992–1995 Bosnian war monuments as vehicles for three mutually exclusive nationalist narratives in contemporary Bosnia and Herzegovina, see Sokol (2014). The author shows how the war memorials and counter-memorials across Bosnia serve not only to consolidate ethno-national identities but also to demarcate ethnically homogenous political spaces perceived as national territories. She also exposes the prominent role of religious symbolism in each of the three nationalist narratives.

## Growing in the Shadow

The fact that the 2005–2006 political turnaround in Bosnia, which not only brought radicals from all three nationalist factions to power again,<sup>8</sup> but also caused the internal division in the IC regarding the further direction of the peace-building mission (see more: Martinović, 2014, pp. 150–154; Sebastian, 2014, pp. 167–169), coincided with the intense internationalisation of the memory of Srebrenica, launched in Potočari on the tenth anniversary in 2005, which led to major consequences. Namely, it provided more opportunities for the Bosniak faction to strengthen and develop their consolidating-antagonising approach based on religiously framed national victimhood on the one hand, while, on the other hand, this trend became hardly visible to the international audience because the Bosniak leaders in Potočari continuously intermingled it with the universalist perspective. Although the continuous implementation of the twofold commemorative strategy based on the tension between the universalist and the nationalist perspectives was the most internationally visible trend in Bosniak memory politics regarding Srebrenica after the year 2005, the most important trend on the ground was regaining dominance by the nationalist perspective.

Before I show the dynamics of the latter trend, I would like to briefly devote attention to the specificity of the former one. It is worth pointing out that the Bosniak interminglement of the universalist and the nationalist approaches consisted mainly in introducing in Potočari new symbolic practices with an ambivalent overtone, which, on the one hand, could have been covered as spaces of promoting the universalist perspective and inclusive memory of Srebrenica, particularly endorsed by the international audience, and, on the other hand, as practices that strengthened nationalist symbolism. A good example of such an event is the Death/Peace March, i.e. an annual hundred-kilometre-long pilgrimage along the route of the July 1995 Bosniak refugees' march (going in the opposite direction), included in the commemorative programme in Potočari after the year 2005. On the one hand, the March built an inclusive memory of the event by allowing all people to participate, regardless of their nationality, language, or religion. To this end, not only was the name of the event changed in 2007 to "Peace March", but participants from all over Europe were regularly invited, including activists from international human rights organisations and even members of the infamous Dutch UN battalion.<sup>9</sup> Many of them either were publicly anointed as friends of the civic Bosnia and Herzegovina, or described themselves as such,

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8 In the Bosniak camp, it was the SBiH led by the freshly radicalised Haris Silajdžić, who in the 1990s was well-known as one of the leaders of the moderate faction of the Bosniak camp.

9 Dutchbat was a Dutch battalion operating in Bosnia under the command of the United Nations, and it was responsible for, yet unable to secure, peace in the UN safe area of Srebrenica. The negligence of Dutchbat's leadership, which led to the takeover of Srebrenica by the Bosnian Serb forces on 11 July 1995, made the mass killings possible. The Dutchbat was criticised by international public opinion for not preventing the mass killings and was systematically accused of a direct cooperation with the perpetrators by the Bosniak media of the 1990s.

like the US Ambassador to Bosnia, who claimed in 2007: "I am one of you, because I am a friend of Bosnia and Herzegovina who wants to pay tribute to the victims and support their families" (Huremović, 2007a).

On the other hand, however, the March had a potential to be presented as another Bosniak consolidatory practice based on the motif of the nation coming back home, which served as a long prelude to the aforementioned funeral of the victims. In this dimension, the march was framed as the solemn unification of all Bosniaks to pass on the memory of national victimhood by the survivors of the refugee march to other members of the nation. Here, the media message continuously developed the aforementioned vision of the Bosniak nation as an eternal being, about which the *Preporod* wrote: "We walked between heaven and earth, in a space of communion with the souls of innocently murdered victims" (Cerić, 2006). Furthermore, the end of the march on 10/11 July in Potočari included the welcoming of its participants by the Mothers of Srebrenica, and thus their symbolic unification with their co-nationals in the collective suffering around national victimhood framed in religious terms (e.g. Numanović, 2006). This is why the IZ leadership stressed in their anniversary speeches that every Bosniak should come to the march and walk at least one metre of the way (Huremović, 2007b).

However, it was neither in the message regarding the symbolic practices, nor central speeches, but in the accompanying message that the nationalist perspective grew most dynamically. The next step in the development of the religiously framed national victimhood was elevating the *šehid* category to the rank of the main symbol of Bosniak martyrdom in Srebrenica. One of the key moments marking this shift from the primacy of the mother symbol to the *šehid* symbol was the sermon given by Mustafa Cerić in Potočari two weeks before the 2006 central commemoration, where he stated that "Potočari is a valley of Bosnian *šehids*, people to whom we all owe our freedom" (Cerić, 2006), thus publicly describing the victims of Srebrenica as *šehids* for the first time since the end of the war. In other words, Cerić not only elevated to the verbal level the symbol that had been re-introduced into Bosniak memory politics a few years before at a non-verbal level, i.e. as part of the Koranic inscriptions on *nišans*, but he also framed this symbol in the national, and not universal, terms. Furthermore, he inscribed the victimhood of the Bosnian *šehids* into the Koranic history by comparing them to Hamza ibn Abdul-Muttalib, the heroic Muslim defender of Medina from the Battle of Uhud,<sup>10</sup> and compared the battle itself to the Srebrenica mass killings: "Our *šehids* from Potočari can be compared to the *šehids* from Uhud" (Cerić, 2006).

The media coverage of the 2006 sermon in Potočari was the first clear signal of sharpening the consolidatory-antagonising perspective by the IZ leadership, quickly followed in the *Preporod* by the partial reactivation of the symbolism known from the first post-war years.

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10 The battle of Uhud (Saudi Arabia) was fought in the year 625 by Medina Muslims led by Prophet Muhammad against the Bedouin tribe Quraysh of Mecca. The hero summoned by Cerić was to die in this battle after having inflicted impressive losses on his opponents, and was then hailed as "the first among the *šehids*". The battle is considered to have been the greatest defeat in the war to defend Medina.

More to the point, on the one hand, the reactivation of *ghazi* (Bos. *gazija*)<sup>11</sup> concept, inextricably linked to the *šehid* symbol, signalled the reintroduction of the “hellish” pattern already in 2006, when *ghazi* returned in a piece composed in the convention of literary fiction, i.e. as a story about a Srebrenica Bosniak named Hamza, who became a victim of the mass executions (Džafić, 2006). The author of the story captured Hamza at the time of the transition between the *ghazi* and *šehid* statuses, when he was led to his death by one of the Serbian units. Hamza brought back memories of the recent struggle against the enemy, about fighting blindly in the dark and seeing neither the enemy nor his own companions, which was interrupted by a series of rifles that started a long and detailed description of the process of transforming him into *šehid*: “He felt how the darkness spread inside him, and at the same time the spaces of the Unknown and the Infinite opened up” (Džafić, 2006). On the other hand, the “heroic” pattern was reintroduced in 2007 in a piece by Alija Jusić, i.e. the same author who a decade earlier had built the image of imam as a link between the nation and the army, in which he elaborated on the imam symbol as a representative of the avant-garde of *Bosnian šehids* (Jusić, 2007). By presenting the personalities of twenty-nine Srebrenica imams, most of them murdered by the VRS, and exposing their heroic commitment to maintaining national solidarity and spiritual and military support for ARBiH soldiers during the mass killings, Jusić added his contribution to the radicalisation of the accompanying message.

In a similar way, the antagonising rhetoric was gaining momentum, at that time feeding mainly on the deepening antagonism between the Bosniak and the Bosnian Serb faction. More precisely, in response to the confrontational stance of the Republic of Srpska leadership, which included extending official patronage to the grassroots counter-celebrations of the “Serbian victims of Srebrenica and Bratunac”, organised on 12 July by the local neo-Nazi movement (A. Hadžić, 2007), the Bosniak media sharpened the course in two ways.

Firstly, they introduced an extensive coverage of the newly introduced symbolic practice of the public opening of mass graves of killed victims just before the central event in Potočari, and focused on exposing disgust with the Serbian crime to a wide audience. This practice was covered each year, e.g. in 2007 it was the opening of the mass grave of Budak, located so close to Potočari that the participants of the central event could visit it before the exhumation of the bodies even began (A. Hadžić, 2007); in 2009 it was the mass grave Kamenica 13 near Zvornik, opened just before the central event in 2009 (A. Hadžić, 2009), etc. All this allowed the Bosniak media to send a drastic accompanying message, both exposing the act of opening graves as well as publicising memories about the torturers who were said to have murdered Bosniaks with blunt axes, buried them alive, burned their corpses, etc.

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11 *Ghazi* is a term for an Islamic warrior who fights against infidels. In the Ottoman Empire, it also functioned as a semi-official honorary dignity, used by some sultans and aristocrats. In the 1990s, the Bosniak media used this term alongside the *šehid* category, e.g. “A Muslim cannot lose if he takes up a fight. He becomes either *ghazi* or *šehid*” (Kadribegović, 1995).

Secondly, the central event in 2007 also marked the return to the symbolic discrediting of international, mostly European, activities in Potočari, inaugurated by the harsh criticism of ICTY Chief Prosecutor Carla del Ponte, a Swiss national, put forward by the Mothers of Srebrenica and covered in the accompanying message. More to the point, during a meeting with del Ponte, who was perceived as an intransigent prosecutor of all post-Yugoslav war criminals, Munira Subašić accused her of hypocrisy and exceptional sluggishness in chasing down Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić. She claimed this was a product of the reconciliatory political line pursued by the IC. This way, for the first time since the 1990s, the Bosniak faction publicly equated a part of the IC with the Bosnian Serbs by addressing del Ponte with the words: "You will hang on the fence of shame in Potočari together with the Chetniks who murdered our children" (Subašić, 2007).

## Out of the Shadows?

Thus, by 2008, the consolidatory message based on the symbolisation of national victimhood had already been strongly present in two out of three dimensions of the media message regarding Srebrenica, i.e. the explicit accompanying message and implicit symbolic practices. However, it remained largely absent in the central speeches in Potočari, where, after the year 2005, the Bosniak faction unanimously focused on openly introducing, for the first time since the war ended, their territorial claim to Bosniak dominance in Bosnia and Herzegovina, expressed as an annually repeated demand to liquidate the Republic of Srpska (RS) on the basis of the conviction that it was a "genocidal creation" (see e.g. Cerić, 2005; Delić, 2005; "I Inglis i Incko traže da pravda bude zadovoljena", 2009; Malkić, 2007).<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, since the main initiator of this move in Potočari was Haris Silajdžić, after his departure from his key functions in the country in 2010 the territorial claim ceased to be the focal point of the speeches, giving way to eventually introducing the *šehid* symbol even here.

More to the point, this happened during the central commemorations in 2010 and 2011, when the continued alienation of the Bosniak faction from the IC, combined with the deepening antagonism between Sarajevo and Banja Luka, led the Bosniak leadership to openly announce a break with the reconciliatory line that the whole faction had followed for the previous decade. At first, Mustafa Cerić, in his 2010 central speech, demanded that the IC should reduce the political pressure on the Bosniak faction, and leave them

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12 This conviction was rooted in an interpretation according to which the 1992–1995 war was not a civil war but both an external Serbian aggression against an independent state of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and a great Serbian genocide against the Bosniak nation. The Bosniak camp had promoted such an interpretation since 1995 in the international arena, i.e. in a trial before the International Court of Justice against the authorities of Serbia (Dimitrijević & Milanović, 2008, pp. 69–70; Subotić, 2010, p. 152), yet until 2005 refrained from exposing it during Srebrenica commemorations.



more symbolic space to officially develop their nationalist perspective – he implored the IC “to stop blaming us for our faith, culture and willingness to have a home and a state that will protect us from genocide” (Silajdžić, 2010). Next, he emphasised the Bosniak turn towards the optics of nationalist particularism by openly speaking of three different ethnic communities living in Bosnia, i.e. something that, for over a decade, had been a taboo subject on the commemorative stage in Potočari, presented as a place where the universalist perspective was exposed. This finally led Cerić to introduce the *šehid* symbol into his speech, thus replacing the previously used inclusive categorisations of the Srebrenica victims, i.e. universalist (“people”), local (“the Srebrenica inhabitants”), and civic (“citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina”), and switching the main addressee of his speech from the IC to his co-nationals, whom he asked to “cultivate the memory of the *šehids*, their family and their brothers” (Silajdžić, 2010).

Just a year later, both Mustafa Cerić and Bakir Izetbegović (i.e. the son of Alija Izetbegović together with the newly emerging leader of the SDA) in their 2011 central speeches added another dimension to the aforementioned shift towards particularism, i.e. they announced the shift from forward-looking reconciliatory optics to the past-looking optics characteristic of the late 1990s, by stating: “Here, in Potočari, everything looks the same as it did sixteen years ago” (Cerić, 2011b). To make this message about the definite abandoning of the reconciliatory path even stronger, Bakir Izetbegović quoted a fragment of his father’s 1997 central speech, which emphasised that national victimhood unambiguously came back to the heart of Bosniak memory politics in relation to Srebrenica: “Srebrenica is the deepest wound on the body of a tormented Bosniak nation that will never skin over” (B. Izetbegović, 2011; see also A. Izetbegović, 1997). The 2011 consolidatory message was additionally strengthened also by Cerić, who openly appealed to the Bosniak audience to renew the collective oath of solidarity in the name of defending the nation against the supposedly imminent repeat of the tragedy: “Here in Potočari every Bosniak should renew their oath to take care of another Bosniak everywhere [...] so that the genocide could never happen again” (Cerić, 2011a). He then emphasised service to the nation as the overriding duty of every Bosniak, who should be ready to sacrifice their own life in the name of the nation’s survival: “Our lives do not belong to us alone, they belong to all those who need us in difficult times” (Cerić, 2011a).

Moreover, this was accompanied by the open articulation of the *šehid* symbol in the consolidatory message regarding symbolic practices in Potočari, which can be best illustrated by two examples. Firstly, since almost a decade of solemn mass funerals had led to the conciliation symbolism of the Memorial Centre being obscured by its martyrdom symbolism focused on the cemetery filled with thousands of white *nišans* with the Koranic inscription from Al-Baqarah, the latter started to be regularly portrayed in media as “the white city of *šehids*, the innocently murdered Bosniaks” (e.g. S. Smajlović, 2011). Secondly, the *šehid* symbol eventually gained dominance over the motif of the suffering woman-victim in such a way that since 2010 the woman had now been depicted mostly



as the mother of *šehid*: either proud of the martyrdom of their children, who sacrificed their lives to save the nation, or an innocent victim, who had irreversibly lost the sense of her life with the death of her beloved ones and now “dies of loneliness and no longer has any dreams of her own” (S. Smajlović, 2011).

Finally, as far as the antagonistic message is concerned, a further tightening of the political course brought about a gradual return of another motif from the 1990s, namely the motif of a total enemy as a category comprising not only the Bosnian Serb or the Serbian factions, but also the IC as a whole. Regarding the latter, already in 2010 Cerić included in his speech an open accusation against the IC of passivity, cynicism, and hypocrisy. Not only did he accuse the IC of humiliating the victims of the mass killings through superficial rhetorical involvement in commemorating the mass killings which was not followed by a real improvement in the fate of the victims and their families, but he also attributed a conscious co-responsibility to the IC for the tragedy by emphasising as follows: “This year’s celebrations resembled the year 1995. When genocide was committed, the whole world thundered and called for an end to it, at the same time supporting it with its own passivity” (Pozder, 2010). A year later, Cerić unambiguously announced the end of illusions about the supposed benefits from the IC for the Bosniak faction: “We were naive, inexperienced and credulous, so we waited for the help of a world that remained silent. [...] today we must cure ourselves of naivety and credulity” (Cerić, 2011a).

Regarding the Bosnian Serbs, the Bosniak faction went on to openly emphasise the category of genocide to prove the continuity of political goals between war criminals and the current political leadership of the Republic of Srpska (RS), who at the same time institutionalised a radical counter-memory of the Srebrenica “massacre”.<sup>13</sup> Here, the indication that the main goal of all post-war RS authorities was to preserve the results of genocide stood at the heart of the narrative about the inevitable return of the Greater Serb expansionism calculated to complete the genocide against the Bosniak nation (e.g. “Srebrenicu tek trebamo početi misliti”, 2010). The pace of the radicalisation of the antagonistic message was so high that already in his 2011 central speech Mustafa Cerić accused the entire Serbian nation of being murderers (Cerić, 2011a), and radical publicists announced the end of the Bosniak reconciliation policy, claiming on behalf of the killed victims: “We will not forgive” (Memić, 2011).

Interestingly enough, the further emergence of the nationalist perspective out of the shadows was abruptly stopped by the internal fragmentation of the Bosniak faction in 2012, which was one of the results of the failed IC’s intervention in the electoral process in Bosnia (Kostić, 2017), and brought to the fore in Potočari the chaotic and

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13 In 2009, for example, RS officials allowed the neo-Chetnik movement to organise a counter-celebration of the “massacre” in Srebrenica (12 July), at which the state flag of Bosnia and Herzegovina was trampled. In 2010, Milorad Dodik extended official patronage to the organisers, and in his confrontational speech he questioned the application of the category of genocide to Srebrenica: “The Republic of Srpska is not genocidal [...]. We believe it was not genocide” (Mustafić, 2010).

scattershot actions of particular nationalist factions. Firstly, the 2012 shift in the position of the IZ leader resulted in a relaxation of the rhetoric of central speeches, i.e. the new Reis-ul-Ulema Husein Kavazović did not continue the sharp course of his predecessor (e.g. Schneier, 2012). Secondly, the de facto dual power in the SDA, where moderate Suleiman Tihić and radical Bakir Izetbegović competed for leadership, resulted in a blurring of the commemorative line of the dominant Bosniak political party (Duraković, 2012). Thirdly, due to the political autonomisation of Fahrudin Radončić, the long-time owner of the *Dnevni Avaz* and hitherto faithful ally of the SDA, who founded his own political party named Union for a Better Future (Savez za Bolju Budućnost, SBB), secondary actors such as the chairwoman of the Mothers of Srebrenica, Munira Subašić, had acquired more symbolic importance (Berbić, 2014; Hadžimešić-Hafizović, 2013). Fourthly, as a result of the gradual return of military symbolism, the ARBiH officers' milieu sought to rebuild their dominant position within the Peace March (A. Hadžić, 2014; Nuhanović, 2013). When, at the beginning of 2015, Bakir Izetbegović finally managed to take over the leadership of the internally divided Bosniak faction, the nationalist perspective was at the same time well-established at the heart of the memory politics in relation to Srebrenica, and overshadowed by the chaotic actions of the preceding few years. Therefore, the question of its further use for radicalising the political agenda remained open.

## Conclusions

The analysis presented in this article reveals that the origins of the contemporary radicalisation of memory politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina lie in the long-term persistence of nationalist memory politics in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina. Based on the example of the activities of the Bosniak political faction in relation to the Srebrenica mass killings, I have shown how the consolidatory-antagonising commemorative strategy, responsible for structuring the national memory of the last war according to a martyrological model, has managed to stay afloat in the public space despite the periodical increase in significance of the opposite, IC-backed cooperative commemorative strategy aimed at transcending national particularisms in the name of the reconciliation between the conflicted nations. Furthermore, I have shown that the nationalists not only were able to withstand the IC's pressure, but they also knew how to take advantage of its limitations, contradictions, and shortcomings in order to articulate, on the outskirts of the public sphere, the martyrological vision of Bosniak national victimhood in terms of religious victimhood, and, finally, openly introduce it onto the main commemorative stage in Potočari. In short, my analysis shows that nationalists in Bosnia and Herzegovina never really lost their monopoly over the production and imposition of a legitimate vision of the social world. Sometimes they were simply weaker and less visible to the international audience.

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## Trwałość martyrologii narodowej. Boszniacka powojenna polityka pamięci o masowych morderstwach w Srebrenicy

### Abstrakt

Artykuł odśladania źródła radykalizacji polityki pamięci w Bośni i Hercegowinie po 2010 roku. Pokazuje, że radykalizacja ta była możliwa dzięki długotrwałemu utrzymywaniu się w sferze publicznej Bośni i Hercegowiny nacjonalistycznej strategii komemoratywnej, która była odpowiedzialna za strukturyzację narodowej pamięci o ostatniej wojnie według ekskluzywistycznego modelu martyrologicznego oraz zakorzeniona w dialektycznym mechanizmie konsolidacji i antagonizowania odpowiednich grup odniesienia. Na przykładzie powojennej boszniackiej polityki pamięci dotyczącej masowych morderstw w Srebrenicy opisany został bardziej uniwersalny mechanizm polityczny, charakterystyczny także dla powojennych polityk pamięci prowadzonych przez nacjonalistyczne elity bośniackich Serbów i bośniackich Chorwatów.

Słowa kluczowe: polityka pamięci; Srebrenica; martyrologia narodowa; Bośnia i Hercegowina

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